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LETTER

ON

AMERICAN SLAVERY.

Addressed to the Editor of the "Edinburgh Witness," 8th July, 1846.

BY AN AMERICAN.

From the Edinburgh Edition, Revised and Corrected by the Author.

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[From the New York Journal of Commerce, of March 25, 1847.]

The following letter was written in July last, while the writer, MR. SIDNEY E. MORSE, Editor of the *New-York Observer*, was in Edinburgh, where George Thompson and other ultra Abolitionists were then making disturbances in the Free Church of Scotland on the subject of American Slavery. The letter was published in the *Edinburgh Witness*, one of the most widely circulated papers in Scotland, and the editor of that paper also issued a large edition in pamphlet form. The letter was spoken of as timely and commendable by several distinguished Scotchmen, among others by Dr. Chalmers.

Subsequently, at the meeting of the Evangelical Alliance in London, when that body came near splitting on the rock of slavery, and a resolution had been introduced, in which slavery was inserted in a catalogue of sins and condemned, Mr. Morse (who drew up the protest signed by the American members and printed in the minutes of the Alliance) took decided ground, and remarked in presence of the whole conference, that after what had been said, he regarded slavery as meaning America, and to permit the word to be used, would be understood as permitting an insult to Americans. The American members who, on Saturday, voted for the resolution, after thinking upon the matter on Sunday, entered their protest on Monday, and the resolution was reconsidered and expunged.

LETTER

ON

AMERICAN SLAVERY.

MR. EDITOR.—Will you permit an American, who is casually sojourning in Scotland, to say a word on the subject connected with his own country, which is exciting so much discussion here at this moment; I mean American Slavery? If the good people of Scotland are to act in reference to this great evil, it is certainly desirable that they should understand its history; and especially,

1. They ought to know that slavery was introduced into the American States by Britain, while they were her colonies, in opposition to the repeated and earnest remonstrances of the colonists.

2. They ought to know that the great anti-slavery movement, which is now going over the world, originated in America; and that Britain, in her negotiations for the abolition of the slave trade, and in her laws for the abolition of slavery, merely followed the example of the Northern States of the American Union.

3. They ought to know that impartial justice, in awarding honors for praiseworthy anti-slavery action to the different branches of the Anglo-Saxon family, must bestow the laurel, not on Britain, not on the Northern States of America, but on a noble band in those very slaveholding States, on which ultra-Abolitionists in Britain and America are accustomed to heap unmeasured and indiscriminating abuse.

4. They ought to know that slavery was so deeply rooted in the Southern States of America, while they were under the dominion of Britain, that the rapid eradication of it by merely moral means would be the greatest moral miracle that the world ever witnessed.

If these assertions are true, I think you will say, Mr. Editor, that it is important, at this time, to show that they are true; and although I have not access here to the documents which would enable me to go as minutely into the matter as I could wish, I will, with your leave, amplify a little under each of these heads.

1. *Slavery was forced upon America by Britain.*

That the slaves were introduced into the present American States by Britain, while they were her colonies, is generally known to readers of history. It is not so generally known that this was done in opposition to the remonstrances of the colonists. The evidence of this fact, however, has often been published in America; and it is well known there that, in the first draft of the declaration of American Independence, Mr. Jefferson introduced the refusal of Britain to heed those remonstrances as one of the justifications of that declaration. The

wise men of Virginia, and other slaveholding States, at an early period foresaw the ruin with which slavery threatened their beautiful country, and sought to avert it by petitioning the British Parliament to stop the importation of slaves; but Parliament was then deaf to the voice of humanity; and Africa was robbed of her sons, and America doomed to suffer for ages under the most grievous of all curses, that British slave-traders might live in palaces, and revel in luxuries, bought with the price of human blood, and the devastation of two continents.

When the first slaves were landed in Massachusetts, more than two hundred years ago, the people of that colony were so indignant, that they fitted out a vessel, put the slaves on board, sent them back to Africa, landed them on the coast at the spot from which they had been taken, and passed a bill in the Colonial Legislature, making man-stealing felony without benefit of clergy. But, unhappily, Massachusetts was then a colony, and this act, and all her anti-slavery acts, were frustrated by the refusal of the mother country to ratify them. Massachusetts was compelled for one hundred and fifty years to suffer cargoes of slaves to be landed and sold on her shores; and at the period of her independence, seventy years ago, there were in her territory some thousands of these slaves, who were then, when she formed her own constitution, instantly emancipated. This emancipation was not by statute law, (for the feeling of the people was so strong that such a law would have been deemed a disgrace to the State,) but by declaration in public convention, that all men are born free and equal; a declaration which her Courts have always regarded as equivalent to the assertion that no statute was needed to abolish slavery in Massachusetts; that slavery had always been forced upon her by Britain; and that when the dominion of Britain ceased, slavery ceased.

The people of this State are still entirely unanimous in a deep abhorrence of slavery. They hate it with a perfect hatred. They regard it as the great enemy of their country. They are ready to enlist with their whole heart and soul in any rational war against it; but they will not engage in a crusade under the lead, on the principles, or in the spirit of the ultra-Abolitionists. They hate slavery, but they love their Christian brethren in the slaveholding States, and have great confidence in their patriotism and piety. In the seven years' war for her own liberty, Massachusetts fought side by side with her sister States of the south, under George Washington of Virginia, who was nominated to the command by John Adams, her own leading patriot; and in the great moral war with slavery, she would choose, on every account, to put southern men in command; she would hope again to find some noble Virginian, who would be able to exhibit, among other qualifications for Commander-in-Chief of the anti-slavery host, that best of all proofs of true zeal and devotedness in the good cause, a willingness, like Washington, to emancipate his own slaves.

2. *America led the way in the great anti-slavery movement which is now going over the world.*

We have seen what Massachusetts did two hundred years ago; and

seventy years ago. The other northern States of America did not take as high ground as Massachusetts; but laws for the abolition of slavery had been passed in all these States, which embrace more than two-thirds of the white population of the American Union, long before the question of abolition of slavery in the West Indies was agitated in Britain.

In 1788, when the present Constitution of the United States was formed, all the great maritime powers of Europe, including Great Britain, were actively engaged in the African slave-trade, and scarcely a murmur was heard against that infamous traffic, even among good Christians in England and Scotland. And yet, at that time, of the thirteen sovereign and independent States in America, *eleven* were ready to vote for its immediate abolition, and only two, South Carolina and Georgia, withheld their consent. These two were finally prevailed upon by the rest to permit an article to be inserted in the new Constitution, conferring upon Congress the power to abolish the trade after a period of twenty years. This negotiation with South Carolina and Georgia was the first negotiation for the abolition of the African slave-trade. The negotiations of Great Britain with Spain, Portugal and France, were not commenced until long afterwards.

3. *The most praiseworthy manifestations of anti-slavery principle, and the greatest sacrifices in the anti-slavery cause, yet made in any part of the Anglo-Saxon world, have been made in the slave-holding States of America.*

The abolition of slavery in the British West Indies was a noble deed, but the principal sacrifice in that case was the sacrifice of the West India proprietors, who made it reluctantly, and only in obedience to the vote of a parliament in which they were not represented. The abolition of slavery in the Northern States of America, has the merit, that it was effected at a time when Britain and the whole European world were unblushing supporters of slavery and the slave-trade; and in Massachusetts the act has the crowning grace that it was done instantly, and in the indignant manner that became a religious and high-minded people in dealing with such a question. But in all the American States which have abolished slavery, the slaveholders, although represented in the legislatures and conventions, were so few in number, that opposition, if they had made it, would have been of no avail, and negro emancipation, therefore, wears there the ungracious aspect of a sacrifice forced from the slaveholder by the vote of men who themselves suffered no loss. It is only in the slave-holding States of America, where no law requires emancipation, that the noble deed was the free-will offering of men who themselves bore the whole burden and cost of the sacrifice. In those States there were, in 1840, 215,580 free blacks, whose value as slaves, at the moderate rate of £100 each, would be £21,558,000,—a sum greater than that paid by the people of Britain for emancipation in the West Indies. This is the sacrifice on the altar of anti-slavery principle made in the slaveholding States of America, not by men who were compelled to do it by vote of a Par-

liament in which they were not represented,—not by men who could put their hands into the richest treasury in the world, and pay out such a sum without feeling it,—but by volunteers, most of whom by their noble act reduced themselves and their families from affluence to poverty.

Of the 215,000 emancipated blacks, 62,000 are in Maryland, a little State, with a white population scarcely greater than that of your city of Glasgow. What do you think, Mr. Editor, of a few thousand individuals in so small a community, making a voluntary sacrifice of property to the amount of more than £6,000,000, out of regard to anti-slavery principle? Is there any parallel to it in the history of emancipation in the British empire? Is there any parallel to it in the history of the world? This sacrifice, let it be remembered, was a sacrifice of property and power inherited from ancestors who acquired and held it under all the sanction of British law. If it could be demonstrated that the surrender by the British aristocracy of the property and power which they hold under the same law would greatly benefit their country and mankind, how many of them, think you, would imitate the example of the aristocracy of Maryland, and, solely from regard to patriotism and principle, make themselves and their children poor and powerless?

Would you not expect, Mr. Editor, that facts so encouraging to all who sincerely desire the abolition of slavery in America, as those I have stated in this article, would be often repeated, and dwelt upon with delight by the speakers at your anti-slavery meetings, and the writers in your anti-slavery publications? I have attended, Sir, many of these meetings since I arrived in Britain, and have read many of these publications, but I have not heard an allusion to one of them. All that I have read and heard is calculated to leave the impression, that anti-slavery principle and anti-slavery feeling in America are confined to a little band of choice spirits in the non-slaveholding States, whom they call, and who call themselves, the Abolitionists; but with whom, permit me to say, the real Abolitionists of America, by which term I mean here the body of noble-minded men in Maryland* and

* A few weeks since I attended the great anti-slavery meeting at Finsbury Chapel in London, called by Mr. George Thompson, for the avowed purpose of bringing public sentiment in England to bear upon the Free Church in Scotland, and compel it to send back the money contributed for its relief in the slaveholding States of America. Allusion was indeed often made by the speakers at this meeting to *Maryland*, but it was always in connection with something *discreditable* to the State (for it seems that, after searching the statute-books, the newspapers, and all the records of the State, from its first settlement down to the present time, some discreditable things have been discovered), and when the orator had held up these deformities to the public gaze, and commented upon them until the audience were sufficiently inflamed, and began to cry out "Shame! shame!" he took care to add, "and the American Minister at the Court of St. James is from this State," that the reproach of Maryland might thus be extended to the whole of America. Now, it is true, Mr. Editor, that Mr. M'Lane, the American Minister at the Court of St. James, is from Maryland; and it is true, too, that he is one of the noble band of real Abolitionists in that State, who long since reduced himself to poverty by emancipating the slaves which he and his good lady inherited from ancestors, who held them under laws made by Britain, and forced upon Maryland while she was under British dominion! But it did not suit the purpose of those who got up this sort of anti-slavery meeting to let such a fact be known. The

other States, who have actually emancipated their slaves, have no fellowship and no sympathy.

4. *The rapid eradication of slavery in the southern States of America by merely moral means would be the greatest moral miracle the world ever witnessed.*

Few persons have any adequate conception of the firmness with which slavery was rooted in the Southern States of America while they were under British dominion. If the importation of slaves had been stopped when the wise men of the South first remonstrated against it, slavery might long ere this have been abolished there by vote of the Legislatures, as it was in the north; but the importation was driven on until the slaveholding interest overwhelmed and controlled all others. More than half the population in all the low country of those States are now negro slaves; while all political power is in the hands of the other half, the great majority of whom are slaveholders and their dependents. Each of these States has the exclusive control of slavery within its own limits. Neither the Government of the United States, nor the Government of any of the Northern States, can meddle with the matter in any way. If slavery is abolished in any State, it must be by the vote of the Legislature of that State,—a Legislature, the majority of whose members are ordinarily themselves actual slaveholders; it must be by the vote of a body of wealthy and powerful men, who will by that vote deprive themselves of the wealth and power which they inherit from their ancestors. This is an entirely new case. It is not the case of slavery in the West Indies,—it is not the case of slavery in the Northern States of America. Slavery was abolished in those countries by Legislatures in which there were few if any slaveholders. The men who voted for abolition, voted away not their own property and power, but the property and power of other men. That was an easy task. We have now to solve a far more difficult problem. How shall we induce a proud aristocracy to vote away power which they hold over 3,000,000 of men, and property which they claim to the value of £300,000,000 sterling? How shall we contrive to abolish slavery in a country where nothing effective can be done without the consent and active co-operation of the *actual slaveholder*? Shall we begin with denouncing him? Shall

object of Mr. Thompson and his associates was to show that the wicked Americans were inveterately attached to slavery, and that it would be wrong in British Christians to suffer them to relieve the distressed, build churches, support ministers, attend temperance conventions, Christian conventions, prayer-meetings, or any other means of grace, while they stood, "whether by their own fault or otherwise," in the relation of slaveholders.

At this meeting one of the speakers quoted the fine passage from Curran, containing the sentiment "that there can be no slavery in Britain,—that the fetters of the slave fall from him the moment he touches the sacred soil of Britain," &c., and the deafening shouts with which the passage was received, showed the proud feeling excited in the bosom of Britons by this great boast of their country. I could not but think, however, that at the very moment when the Court decided the case of Somerset the slave, upon which that boast is founded, Britain was forcing slavery upon all her colonies in the New World. And what are we to think of a mother, with a poisoned cup in her hand, boasting that she would not for the world touch it to her own lips, and yet forcing her children to drink it to the dregs! Is her boast anything but that of a murderer who has too much sense to commit suicide?

we refuse to have any fellowship with him? Shall we shut him out of our prayer-meetings and temperance-meetings? If he is disposed to sympathise with us, and offers us money to help us in our necessities, shall we throw it in his face? And, to make him feel how reasonable it is that we, of all people in the world, should treat him so, shall we tell him that we are Britons,—that we belong to the country which forced this slavery upon him,—that we live in palaces, and roll in carriages bought with the money which he paid us for these slaves, and that we mean still to live and to roll in them, while we call upon him to give up the property which we sold him, as he can have no good title, because we stole it? Is this the way that British Christians are to deal with the American slaveholder?

No; the abusive, denunciatory, non-intercourse policy will not do. The ultra-Abolitionists in the Northern States of America have tried it for more than ten years, and the result has been just what all men of plain common sense predicted. All the while that this abolition storm has been blowing from the north, the southern slaveholder has stood with his cloak wrapped closely about him, and there he will continue to stand till the storm subsides, and the sun of Christian love again shines warmly upon him. Every high-spirited people instinctively resist foreign interference in their affairs. If that interference comes in the shape of moral rebuke, they will naturally look sharply at the party who administers it; and if they see there, as they would see in the present case, one more guilty than themselves, the principal in the crime, to which they were reluctant accessories,—one who, for his own profit, led them and drove them into their sin,—the thief, in short, who sold them the stolen goods which he now calls upon them to restore,—they will not tolerate in such a reprover, the arrogant language of the Pharisee, “Stand by thyself, for I am holier than thou,” but will require him to approach in the attitude of the humble penitent, confessing and grieving for the wrong he has done, and offering to do all in his power to repair it. If Britons would aid in abolishing American slavery, let them go in that attitude, and with the language and tone that become that attitude.

S. E. M.

